

Power of Childbirth Choices - Education and Information

Childbirth professionals, birthing networks, birth professionals, natural childbirth advocates...are all names used to describe the growing community actively advocating for childbirth as a normal healthy part of a woman's life cycle. Through the use of childbirth education, this community's life goal is to empower women to make informed choices around their pregnancy and delivery options using evidence-based research as the foundation.

As a member of this growing community, I am often caught between what I view as two worlds. My reality, in which I am childbirth professional certified in childbirth education, perinatal fitness, and a breastfeeding peer counselor trainer. Then there is the other real world, where my work in a community-based agency allows me to witness the politics of being pregnant and giving birth in the "inner city."

I listen to my professional daytime colleagues express opinions indicating that what we birth advocates do is 'cute', but distracting to the bigger picture, their picture. They ask if our services are free, as if we shouldn't dare dream of earning a living this way. They even sometimes dismiss our credentials with statements such as, Yes, what you do is nice, but clients prefer to have someone qualified with them.", when they talk about providing quality education.

To be fair let's examine the flip side of the coin. The same people who I treasure for their insightfulness and dedication to mothers and their families can sometimes be overwhelming with their crusade. Exaggerations are made about obstetricians and the quality of hospital births and bashing sometimes becomes part of the circle of sharing.

What is childbirth education and why is it important?

The definition of childbirth education can be as varied as there are education modalities. Although definitions can vary among educators and or certification institutions... it can be simply defined as follows:

Childbirth Education Classes prepare a woman for the experience of pregnancy, labor, and delivery. Through the use of a series of classes a woman is educated on the anatomy, physiological changes, nutrition, risks and benefits of medical interventions, pain coping strategies, cesarean risk reduction, and breastfeeding. Some educators are also taught to encourage women to recognize and use their innate abilities and intuition to birth.

Did you know the Healthy People 2010 update section 16:7 directly addresses childbirth education? The Healthy People 2010, a set of health objectives designed to guide health professionals in achieving improved health results for Americans over the first decade of the new century, speaks to the importance of improving maternal, infant and child health in this quote:

Section 16:7

As part of comprehensive prenatal care, a formal series of prepared childbirth classes conducted by a certified childbirth educator is recommended for all women by the Expert Panel on the Content of Prenatal Care. [49] These classes can help reduce women's pain [50] and anxiety [51] as they approach childbirth, making delivery a more pleasant experience and preparing women for what they

will face as they give birth. A full series of sessions is recommended for women who have never attended. A refresher series of one or two classes is recommended for women who attended during a previous pregnancy. At a minimum, the childbirth classes should include information regarding the physiology of labor and birth, exercises and self-help techniques for labor, the role of support persons, family roles and adjustments, and preferences for care during labor and birth. The classes also should include an opportunity for the mother and her partner to have questions answered about providers, prenatal care, and other relevant issues, as well as to receive information regarding birth settings and cesarean childbirth. Attendance is recommended during the third trimester of pregnancy so that information learned will be used relatively soon after presentation. Classes should begin at the 31st or 32nd week and be completed no later than 38 weeks. The refresher class should be completed at any time between 36 and 38 weeks.

This recommendation is important and should be highlighted by all advocates and prenatal care providers. It validates the need for childbirth education as a routine part of comprehensive women's prenatal healthcare. Independent childbirth educators are an excellent choice for women who want to receive unbiased information not driven by hospital policy and procedures. For those educators whose work does come under the parameters of organizations' policy and procedures, they must remember their main function is to work for the betterment of their client "the expectant mother". In evaluating the quality of childbirth education classes, the curriculum should be consumer focused and the materials and information presented should be honest and forthcoming in presenting the risks vs. benefits based on evidence-based research.

What is the bottom line?

We live in a fast-paced society, particularly here in the New York metropolitan region. As a result, many consumers are requesting shorter classes and fewer sessions. It is our responsibility as birthing advocates to give them quality services, and if this means an increase in the quantity of time we devote to instruction then that's a responsibility we need to meet. Many online classes and weekend intensives are now replacing traditional 6 week plus classes. This new trend is essentially depriving women of the support that is traditionally found in longer face-to-face settings. Although the Healthy People 2010 statement does not specifically spell out what a full series of classes consists of, one can intelligently conclude that based on the amount of recommended information to be covered a realistic time allotment is needed for the human mind to receive, accept and digest.

As childbirth professionals we need to continually refer back to the evidence-based literature around childbirth which includes research findings which can be found online (at sites such as Childbirth Connection (formerly the Maternity Center), the Coalition to Improve Maternity Services and the World Health Organization (WHO) to name a few). The Expert Panel on the Content of Prenatal Care has officially validated the value of childbirth education classes essentially confirming what we know anecdotally. It is now our responsibility to know what that truth is and speak it boldly to our clients. The truth about pregnancy is that childbirth education classes should be a routine part of every woman's comprehensive prenatal care. Recognizing that every pregnancy and birth is unique, for the woman who has delivered before a refresher course would update her on her options and also allow her and her support person to ask related questions. These two scenarios are examples of knowledge as power because they create an opportunity for the mother to be educated and as a result make decisions that are best for her and her baby.

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